
International Students' Use of Facebook vs. a Home Country Site

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Abstract

Previous work on social network sites (SNSs) tends to examine use of a single site, such as Facebook. In this survey study, we examined international students' motivations for participation in Facebook versus a site (Renren or Cyworld) from their own country. We anticipated that use of Facebook would be driven by desires to expand bridging social capital, whereas use of the home country site would be driven primarily by the desire to maintain existing bonds. A survey of 335 Chinese and Korean students in the U.S. showed that

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contrary to our expectations, desires to develop both bridging and bonding social ties were associated with greater intensity of activity on Facebook and the home country site. Greater intentions to interact with people from their own home country were associated with greater interaction on the home country site. Both intensity of site use and number of friends were higher for Korean than Chinese respondents. We conclude with some thoughts as to how our findings might be used to help people manage social relationships across two different sites in different countries.

Author Keywords

Computer mediated communication; social network sites.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.4.3 Computers and Society: Organizational Impacts: Computer-supported collaborative work.

Introduction

Social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook (FB) are handy tools for growing and maintaining connections [2]. They make it easier to maintain connections with old friends or develop new ties with people met in passing [3]. One of the strengths of large SNS is that a single site can be used both to maintain bonding ties with those who can offer emotional support and

bridging ties with acquaintances who may be useful for information exchange [7].

In the case of international students in the U.S., however, bonding and bridging networks may be split across two or more SNSs. These students may have a prior SNS based in their home country (e.g., China's Renren or Weibo, Korea's Cyworld, Japan's Mixi, etc.) that includes networks of friends who speak the same native language and that are valuable for maintaining connections with people from home. At the same time, engagement in an English language SNS like FB may be important for creating and maintaining connections with new friends and acquaintances in the U.S. This existence of two different SNS, one in their native language and one in English, may present some dilemmas for international students. For example, if there is limited time available for socializing, time spent on one site will mean less time to spend on the other. Less time spent on the site from a student's home country might lead to neglect of bonding ties. Less time spent on FB might delay network building and adaptation to the new environment [11].

Previous cross-cultural research on SNS use suggests that cultural norms influence people's usage patterns (e.g., [1], [4], [8], [9], [12]). However, the majority of these studies compared SNS users in the U.S. to SNS users in another country as opposed to individuals who have a choice between two or more different SNSs. The goal of the current study is to explore the factors that influence international students' participation in their home country SNS vs. FB.

We surveyed 335 international students from China and South Korea, who used either Renren (China) or

Cyworld (Korea) in addition to FB. We examined how factors such as desire for bridging and bonding ties, and years in the U.S., affected the intensity of use of each site and people's total number of friends on that site. Our general hypothesis was that an emphasis on bonding ties would be associated more highly with time spent on a participant's home country site, whereas an emphasis on bridging ties would be more highly associated with time spent on FB. We also anticipated that FB use would increase the longer a respondent had been in the U.S.

Method

Participants

Respondents (N=335, 196 Chinese, 139 Korean) were recruited from a large U.S. university and through ads on SNSs. Respondents ranged from 18 to 41 years old (Chinese M = 24.5; Korean M = 25.0). To participate in the study, they had to have lived in the U.S. less than five years (Mean years in the U.S. were 3.0 for Chinese and 3.7 for the Korean participants). Respondents took about 30 minutes to complete the survey. They were given \$5 Starbucks e-gift cards as compensation.

Materials

We developed an online survey that asked a set of parallel questions about participants' use of FB and their home country site (Renren or Cyworld). The scale items (described in the next section) were adapted from validated measures reported in previous studies. Two sets of questions were included, one for FB and the other for the respondents' home country site. The wording for the two sets of the questions was exactly the same; only the name of the site was changed. The survey was conducted in English. In addition, we collected demographic information.

Measures

Demographics

Participants reported their nationality (Korean or Chinese), gender, and years spent in the US.

SNS use

For each site, participants reported how long they had kept a site profile (< 6 months, 6 months to 1 year, 1-2 years, 2-4 years, > 4 years), how many groups they belonged to, and how many of these groups they were active in (both using a scale of <=5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50; > 50). We also asked how much time they spent on the site in the past week (< 10 min, 10-30 mi, 31-60 min, 1-2 hours, 2-3 hours, > 3 hours, always open).

Bonding and bridging ties

Bonding ties on each site were measured using four items from Choi et al. [1] (e.g., "When I feel lonely, there are people on <SNS> I can talk to") These questions formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = .76$) and were averaged to create a measure of bonding ties. Bridging ties on each site were also measured using four items from Choi et al. [1] (e.g., "Interacting with contacts on <SNS> makes me interested in what people unlike me are thinking"). These items formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = .77$) and were averaged to create a measure of bridging ties.

Intensity of SNS use

We adapted Ellison et al.'s scale of FB use [2] to measure respondents' use of each SNS (e.g., "<SNS> is part of my everyday activity;" "I sometimes use <SNS> without a specific purpose"). Answers were on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. These questions formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = .91$)

and were averaged to form a measure of intensity of use.

Connection strategies

We used a scale adapted from Ellison et al. [2] to assess respondents' strategies for connecting with others on each SNS. They respond to each scale item with respect to three social groups: Americans, people from the same home country, and international people from countries other than their home country. Factor analysis with Varimax rotation indicated two factors. Nine items pertaining to relationships with people from different home countries (e.g., "meet new American people") created a reliable scale ($\alpha = .90$) as did four items pertaining to relationships with people from the same home country (e.g., "keep in touch with my old friends") ($\alpha = .74$). Average scores were used as measure of "connect with other groups" and "connect with own group," respectively.

Number of friends on SNS

Participants estimated how many total friends they had on each site (<=100, 101-200, 201-300, 301-500, 501-1000, >1000).

Results

General SNS Use

As can be seen in Table 1, participants had fairly similar numbers of friends, and participated in fairly similar numbers of groups on both FB and their home country site. They spent somewhat more time on FB each week.

	Chinese		Korean	
	FB	Renren	FB	Cyworld
Profile (mths)	23.0 (12.4)	27.2 (14.9)	23.6 (12.0)	24.0 (17.7)
Total Friends	187.3 (121.9)	200.0 (140.4)	248.5 (107.3)	223.6 (121.3)
Actual Friends	18.62 (10.66)	18.52 (10.72)	24.42 (12.16)	22.44 (11.95)
Groups	15.0 (9.8)	14.3 (9.6)	19.2 (9.6)	17.6 (9.9)
Active Groups	11.6 (7.8)	11.9 (8.3)	15.4 (8.6)	15.8 (9.9)
Use (mins)	92.0 (118.9)	71.1 (96.0)	122.8 (138.3)	96.0 (107.1)

Table 1. Mean responses by nationality and site (SD in parentheses)

Number of Friends per Site

We examined the total number of friends on the site using hierarchical regression. Predictors included demographic factors, self-reported bridging and bonding ties on the site, and self-reported interest in connecting to individuals from their home country vs. other countries. These models predicted a significant proportion of the variance for both home country site and Facebook ($R^2 = .17$ and $.16$ respectively, both $p < .0001$). The results are shown in Table 2. Younger respondents had more total friends on both FB and Renren/Cyworld. In addition, Korean respondents reported more total friends on both sites than Chinese respondents. Time spent in the US was strongly associated with total friends on FB ($b = .19$, $p < .001$).

Interest in connecting with people from other groups was strongly and negatively associated with use of

one’s home country site ($b = -.32$, $p < .001$). As we anticipated, intensity of site use was associated with number of friends on that site. However, while this relationship was quite strong for the home country site ($b = .41$, $p < .001$), it was only a trend in the FB regression ($b = .13$, $p < .10$).

	Cyworld or Renren	Facebook
Demographics		
Nationality	-.11 *	-.26****
Rel. Status	.06	.03
Gender	.07	-.02
Age	-.18 ***	-.14 **
Years in U.S.	.10 +	.19****
Relationships		
Bonding	.07	-.07
Bridging	-.12	.01
Connect-own	.10	-.04
Connect-other	-.32 ****	-.12
SNS Use		
Intensity	.41 ****	.13 +
R ²	.17	.16
F full model	6.61 ****	6.00 ****
df full model	10, 324	10, 324

+ $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .005$, **** $p < .001$

Table 2. Standardized b values for regressions predicting total friends on respondents’ home country site and Facebook.

Discussion

Our results provide only minimal support for our conjecture that home country sites would be used primarily for bonding ties and FB would be used primarily for bridging ties. Measures of bridging and bonding, as well as desires to connect to other groups, were strongly associated with use of both types of sites. However, not surprisingly, a desire to connect with people from one's own country was significantly correlated only with intensity of use of the home country site. In addition, a desire to connect to other groups was negatively associated with total number of friends on the home country site. This suggests that respondents who were not particularly active in their home country site may see a specific purpose in FB use – to make new connections – while in the US.

We also found that Korean respondents reported using FB more intensely than Chinese respondents. In pilot interviews prior to the survey study, Korean interviewees (N=3) pointed out that Cyworld use has been on the decline these years and more users are adopting Facebook instead. In addition, the ban on FB in China may play a role, since respondents could not connect to their FB contacts when at home. Unlike Korean users who can merge their social networks on FB, Chinese users may need to attend to those already constructed relationships on the Chinese sites.

Time spent in the US was positively correlated with total friends on both Renren/Cyworld and FB. Not surprisingly, the longer Chinese and Korean nationals live in the U.S., the more new people they meet and befriend on FB. Meanwhile, they continue to maintain their existing social networks on Renren/Cyworld.

Design Implications

Counts of numbers of friends and time spent in each community (Table 1) suggest that international students' social networks are fairly evenly distributed across two different sites. One design implication is that international SNS users might benefit from tools that allow them to combine activities across the two sites, for example, to simultaneously post a status update to both sites. Another implication is that the prioritization of stories in the newsfeeds of each site may be especially important because users are dividing their time and attention across multiple sites.

Limitations

There are several limitations in this study. First, our data was cross-sectional so we do not know how respondents shifted their participation in their home country site vs. FB over time. Second, we measured only a small number of possible factors that might motivate intensity of use of SNS. Lastly, since the actual social network development is of interest and social networks change over time, a longitudinal study of relationship development would offer valuable insight.

Conclusion

This study extends previous research on SNS use and social network building (e.g. [1], [4], [9]) by looking at the international students' use of both FB and their home country SNS. On the whole, desires for bridging and bonding are associated with intensity of use on both sites. Desire to connect with members of other groups is associated with fewer friends on one's home country site. The findings suggest a need for new tools to help users integrate bonding and bridging ties across multiple SNS.

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